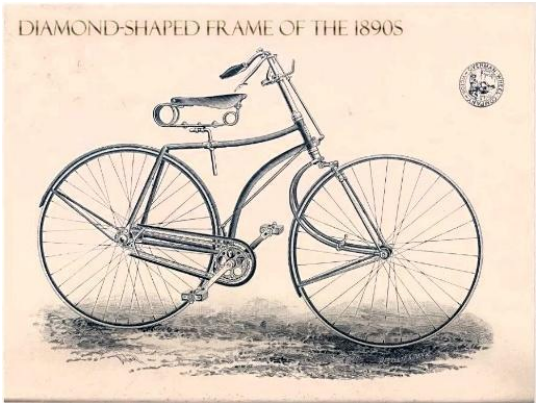
Retro #37: The SSC Bike Club: When Bicycles Took Over Bay St. Louis

In the mid-1890s, America fell hard for a new invention: the *safety bicycle*. With two equal-sized wheels, pneumatic tires, and the now-classic diamond frame, it replaced the perilous high-wheeler and suddenly made cycling safe, comfortable, and affordable. Bay St. Louis caught the fever instantly.

Columbia high-wheel bicycle, 1886, in the National Museum of American History's collection. Albert Pope and the Pope Manufacturing Company dominated the bicycle market in the 1880s with the Columbia brand of high-wheel bicycles

Bicycles became so common around town that by 1896 the city had to pass ordinances banning sidewalk riding and requiring headlamps after dark. The *Sea Coast Echo* even scolded local "speeding bicyclers"—likely including a few spirited St. Stanislaus students.

The craze hit the college so strongly that St. Stanislaus formed its own Bike Club, led by Brother Jude Brisebois. According to the weekly St. Stanislaus College Notes in the *Sea Coast Echo,* the club started in January of 1898 with 30 members and quickly swelled to 50—about one-third of the entire student body. Those without their own $12 bicycle (roughly $480 today) could rent one in town for 25 cents an hour.



The club's weekly excursions along the beach and through Bay St. Louis became a familiar sight. The newspaper fondly wrote that the riders "made the streets ring with the silver tinkling of their bells."

Sundays and holidays brought even bigger outings. Students—and occasionally faculty members such as Br. Jude and music professor John Hemmersbach—pedaled along Front Street and the shell road by the college. Not every ride went smoothly. One 1898 report noted that "punctured tires were common," and a later issue revealed why: pranksters had scattered tacks along the route, turning many cyclists into reluctant walkers pushing their bikes home.

Beyond leisurely rides, the Bike Club hosted races during holiday celebrations and decorated their wheels for parades, adding flair to community events.

The bicycle boom rolled on into the early 1900s before gradually giving way to America's next obsession—the automobile. But for a few shining years, the students of St. Stanislaus helped make Bay St. Louis a true cycling town.